

**“The (Cyber) Center Cannot Hold”:
Futures, Bodies and Minds in William Gibson’s *The Peripheral***



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IN *The Peripheral* (2014), William Gibson revisits in a dystopian, or maybe utopian, mode issues such as alternative communities, the possibilities that technology offers for transcendence (not least importantly that of the body itself), and the effect on individuals of hyper-technologized post-late capitalist societies. Gibson goes back to the familiar space of the über-modern city as a locale for his fiction, while also advancing ecological concerns and hypotheses on the effects of an environmental, economic, and political apocalypse. The move “from a predictive style of science fiction to contemporary fiction” in Gibson (Griffith 44) emphasizes the connection in his writing between the present and imagined futures, since as he has declared, “[w]ithout a sense of how weird the present is—how potentially weird the present is— it became impossible for me to judge how much weirder I should try to make an imagined future” (Dayal).

This move seems to contradict Gibson’s association with cyberpunk,¹ a genre which carries with it a “bleak perception of the possibility of agency” (Wilson 91). I would like to argue, however, that Gibson is still writing within the genre, and that the potential for connection between privileged and under-privileged individuals through technology is at the core of Gibson’s novel. In this sense, *The Peripheral* does use what has been called the “sentimental endings” (Elias) preferred by Gibson, and as Paul Graham Raben suggests, it is a “standard Gibson . . . suggesting a benchmark of quality, certainly, but also that trustworthy familiarity of form that accrues to any consistently reliable brand.” This familiarity, however, also suggests the possibility of change by allowing the disfranchised to be in charge of their own bodies and destinies.

The Peripheral is set in two different future times, seventy years apart, the first of which is the second’s past. In the later one, early 22nd century London is an extreme late-capitalist society, a mixture of “post-humanism and globalized military-industrial technological complex ruled solely by the logic of finance capitalism” (Elias), after the

apocalypse known as the Jackpot has taken place. This Jackpot is a combination of “unchecked climate disaster, worldwide financial collapse, rampant disease outbreak, and ubiquitous social breakdown after the crackup of all nation-states” (Elias), and it has wiped eighty percent of the Earth’s population. Those who have survived did so by using “assemblers” (advanced nanotechnology bots) to rebuild cities, which has provided for efficient, eco-friendly cities which are, nonetheless, mostly empty. In this 22nd century future, “peripherals” (remotely controlled enhanced cyborgs avatars) can be used as protection or disguise. These surrogate bodies are a commodity, and the most advanced models can only be afforded by the wealthy. Personal security can be ensured by using the peripherals to interact from the safety of a distant location.

In the second future we find a piece of rural America in the 2030s, which Gibson has defined as a “a more fully corrupt, third-worlded version of contemporary America” (“William Gibson”). There, bodies are less a commodity than a burden, with impoverished army veterans suffering constant neural pain from malfunctioning haptic implants or having very limited control of their bodies due to permanent physical disabilities. The inhabitants of this timeline (or “stub”) are “dependent upon (and highly proficient using) advanced technology, but under-educated and futureless, scraping a living by working in tech-industry workshops, low-end merchandise superstores, and illegal black markets” (Elias). A so-called “singularity” temporarily allows both timelines to interact, but not reciprocally. The 2100s future can talk and listen to, but not physically manipulate, their past, while inhabitants of the past, projecting their minds into the peripherals and inhabiting them, can physically interact with the future. The control of the bodies of the future by the minds of the past promises to be of benefit to both. The people in the future can profit from mental capabilities (knowledge, information and skills) of the characters in the past, while the successful use of the peripherals allows disabled veterans both the exhilarating opportunity of escaping their own limited bodies and a hefty financial reward.

My argument when it comes to what I consider a recent shift in Gibson’s texts will be two-fold: first, I will explore what Gibson does to the bodies in the book, beyond Cartesian traditional divisions of body and mind, as bodies can be analyzed as commodities to be used, bought, sold, or hired in the unequal economies of the two time-lines in the text, and secondly, I will analyze how the tension between center and peripheries works, and the potential for political and social change at the end of the book.

I Sing the Body Peripheral

The Cartesian divide between body and mind is one that has worried Gibson during his entire career. His work makes us reconsider the existence of the divide itself, and also the preponderance, dependence and/or equilibrium of one and the other.

The ambivalence of cyberpunk as a genre towards the body (“its integrity, its vulnerability, even its possibility as an idea” Gutiérrez-Jones 71), and more specifically Gibson’s apparent rejection of the body as “dead meat” in *Neuromancer*, where we are presented with “characters who seek to reject the body” (Wilson 132) seems to stage the virtual world as one of exhilarating possibility, celebrating the “bodiless exultation of cyberspace” (Gibson, *Neuromancer* 3). However, as Sherryl Vint points out, Gibson’s “critics and his imitators have overstated [his] rejection of the body” (107). The rejection or, rather, transcendence of the body often carries social and political commentary in his work, and this is the case with *The Peripheral*.

In the book, the bodies of people in the past, especially those of veterans, are a burden due the failed use of technology. Malfunctioning haptic tattoos are a constant source of pain and an example of how useful technology can go awry when it goes from being useful to the machinery of war to being abandoned inside the individual. Disabled veterans, maimed by technological violence and war, are constantly reminded of their subordination to economic and political spheres and also of the government “owning” their bodies, either for sacrifice, or by leaving invasive technology in them. The relationship that people in the future have with their bodies is, however, radically different: bodies are used as “art” based on “complex embodiments of technological accumulation” (Griffith 45). Bodies are also commodified instruments for protection. Peripherals can be operated remotely, while the mind maneuvering them stays safely elsewhere but is in complete control of the peripheral’s physical surroundings, a combination of ultimate safety and total control of the environment for those who can afford it. The encounter of both timelines, with minds from the past being invited to inhabit cybernetic bodies of the future, allow those in the past the thrilling liberation of their constricting bodily “meat” into apparently limitless athletic shells.

While not in such traumatic or violent ways as in Cronenberg’s films, there is in Gibson a constant menace of technology entering and transforming/transcending the body. In his texts, technology can enhance and liberate the mind, but it can

also destroy the body, create addictions to different drugs that desensitize the body to specific technology, or produce constant pain. Technology can also, however, fix bodies (such as the use of medical nanobots which travel through the body repairing tissue and internal organs in *The Peripheral*), even if that body-repairing technology is connected to its origins in military operations.

The use of different bodies and avatars in *The Peripheral* seems to eventually be mostly positive, as they ultimately serve each character's original timelines and their communities, i.e. their reality. The poor and disabled characters in *The Peripheral* whose minds are being projected into other bodies are able to access abilities they no longer have, and environments they could never walk in. But they do know, no matter how exhilarating the experience may be, that this is temporary and serving a specific purpose: the time inhabiting another body may be pleasurable, but eventually, it is their own temporal "reality" that they are responsible and accountable for.

People in the future in *The Peripheral* use these cyborg bodies as tools, but they are also willing to use the minds from the past (and their skills and knowledge) as a commodity. The people from the past enter this pact, this disembodied rental of their selves, knowingly and expecting to get something in return. What they are initially hoping for is money, something they are in dire need of, but towards the end of the book they get more than they bargained for, in the form of agency given to them by the ones apparently with the power, by the future.

Present Centers, Peripheral Pasts

Even if the peripheral in the title makes reference to the cyborgs avatars in the book, there is another way in which the title of the text could be analyzed: the 22nd century future could be constructed as the center, both economically and in the sense of power and agency, with the 21st century future being the margin, the periphery. The center has wealth and technology that are not available to the periphery, and said periphery is initially only given access to technology insofar it serves the center's interests. As Gibson has noted, in *The Peripheral* the past is "third-worlded" for the profit of First-World cities ("William Gibson"). As Amy J. Elias signals, in a way this relationship could be seen as a replication of "the Colonialism that gave First-World Nations their early-modern economic hegemony . . . now located not only in space but in time" (Elias). But while this "lending" or "outsourcing" of technology to the

peripheries is a reality in our world and in literary texts, there are a number of things in *The Peripheral* that complicate the relationship between center, margins and how outsourcing technology works.

First off, in *The Peripheral* the “Other,” post-colonial subjects pose no physical risk, i.e. there is no danger of their uprising or taking over the center, since the only way they can communicate with the future is by the future allowing their using the technology they provide them with. Secondly, the relationship of center and periphery is not really one of exploitation, but one of collaboration, where the periphery is given notable agency both in how they use their (borrowed) bodies and in the reward for their help. In opposition to traditional constructions of center/periphery relations, the periphery that the past is in the book is given notable agency, by providing them, “the precariat that will be wiped out when the Jackpot is unleashed” (Elias) with both money and technology. They also get knowledge in exchange for their work: all of these things could potentially help them elude the Jackpot apocalypse. One could argue that there is deception initially as to the people in the future’s interests (the protagonist, Flynn, thinks that she is just being paid to play a first-person videogame, while she is actually part of a real-life surveillance program), and that some rich people in the future do “use the past as a playground and hiring pool, soliciting people from the past to work for them as an underclass labor fare” (Elias). However, in the end, giving knowledge and power to people in the past could be considered to be an entirely selfless act, since due to time-travelling paradoxes (what Gibson has defined as “forking paths” (“William Gibson”), changes in the past’s reality will not affect the future we see in the book.

Gibson understands that technology itself is neutral, and it is the use of it that makes it destructive or “a universal tool for countering hegemonic power structures” (Moorwood 178). As Esko Suoranta points out, Gibson does require that we think beyond the promises of these “embodied technologies of transhumanity,” and to realize that “they themselves do not dismantle oppressive systems” (18). People in the past in the book are given access to these technologies and thus to using them to try and avoid the Jackpot, but Gibson himself has expressed his “alarm at the ending . . . [where] a situation is set up such that the fate of the world literally rests on the goodwill of a very few people who can easily be corrupted by the power they yield” (Elias). Since both futures are “caught on singularities,” Elias seems to side with Gibson in seeing how the potential for improvement seems not to depend on

“collective action or democratic representation,” and points out the visible tension between Gibson’s “rather old-fashioned humanist ethics—for which the success of social structures depends upon private, ethical decisions by self-determining individuals—and his cyberpunk vision, which implicitly asserts that human ethics is irrelevant in a world of capital” (Elias).

It is possible, however, to present Gibson’s ending and the agency given to the margins in the text under a slightly more positive light, focusing not on the lack of systemic changes that Elias seems to be distressed by, but on how systemic changes may start with individuals being given the agency and responsibility to implement singular, incremental changes. I would like to emphasize the possibility of a deep empathic connection of the two humanities in their respective social context that motivates the final mutual understanding of both futures. This can be achieved by applying the change in the idea of kinship suggested among others by Judith Butler, where kinship needs not be merely biological, but rather constituted by “a sense of relatedness, mutual responsibility, and collaborative creativity, all growing out of a presumption of shared origins” (Gutiérrez-Jones 72). Gutiérrez-Jones recovers ideas by Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Butler to talk about the performativity of kinship, i.e. kinship seen as a process of creation of relations that exists in a material context and therefore “entails some aspect of embodiment” (72). Butler also identifies in her redefinition of kinship a “shared responsibility . . . a potential for coalition, and shared performance, which generates significant creative potential” (Gutiérrez-Jones 73).

In his analysis of Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, Fredric Jameson asserts that “the utopian drive [can be] an impulse of collectivity and the human being . . . a collective animal, perhaps something of a biological origin might be adduced for it too” (306). Jameson also signals that characters in Gibson’s text “complete each other,” pointing out the “collective (and thereby utopian) act” at work in *Neuromancer*. Jameson immediately qualifies this collective effort by emphasizing that in that text the need for collaboration is “a ruse devised by . . . two mega-computers in the service of their alliance and transfiguration” and that therefore the “utopian dimension” is displaced (Jameson 307). There is not such a ruse at work, however, at the end of *The Peripheral*: the act of “giving” the past a better future could be seen as a factor of a re-imagined notion of kinship that is recognized in the time (dis)continuum, and as such, the ending could work as a powerful deconstruction of the center/periphery or



metropolis/colonies configuration set up at the beginning of the text.

Timo Siivonen has signaled Gibson's tension between "technological developments and the future of humanizing," often moving in between "two opposing forces, with one expressing pessimism regarding the future of the human race, and the other evincing a certain optimism regarding the possibility of the existence of intelligent life on some level facilitated by technological development" (231). I would like to argue that, by deconstructing traditional constructions of the periphery's minds and mostly bodies as being "used" by the center, and by providing the weakest part of the equation with technology that seems to promise a better future, Gibson seems to be moving towards a certain utopian optimism. I find this assertion to be in line with Jameson's argument that literature "can serve as a registering apparatus for historical transformations we cannot otherwise empirically intuit" (Jameson 312). In *The Peripheral*, there is the reality of those on the margins finding their corporeal suffering temporarily reduced through technologies of virtual labor, but also the possibility of a better future once the work has been done, by being given agency and knowledge by the center. This is a testament to how non-realistic literature, such as the cyberpunk mode Gibson uses, can be political by allowing us to imagine new configurations of kinship as the first step systemic changes beyond traditional models of center v. periphery.

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